

THE LIFTING UP OF THE SON OF MAN: THE CROSS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

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Introduction

Jesus' crucifixion receives special attention in John's Gospel testimony, just as one would expect in a book written to persuade unbelievers. Actually, John mentions the cross earlier in his account and he mentions it more often than any of the Synoptics. Notice how late the three famous passion predictions occur in the Synoptics (Matthew 16 // Mark 8 // Luke 9 occur during the last six months of Jesus' ministry):¹

First Synoptic Passion Prediction:	Mt 16:21 // Mk 8:31 // Lk 9:22
Second Synoptic Passion Prediction:	Mt 17:22–23a // Mk 9:20–31 // Lk 9:43b–44
Third Synoptic Passion Prediction:	Mt 20:17–19 // Mk 10:32–34 // Lk 18:31–34

Prior to these (commonly titled His first, second, and third passion predictions) Jesus also predicted His death and resurrection in Matthew 12:39–40 (summer, A.D. 31).²

On the other hand, John 1:29 alone records the words of John the Baptist, saying: *Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*³ The reference to the Lamb of God anticipates His sacrificial death. Almost a year later, Jesus predicted the cross and resurrection.

In John 2:19, when Judeans asked for a sign demonstrating that He had the right to cleanse the Temple, He said: *Destroy this sanctuary and I will raise it up in three days.* John explains in v 21: *But He was talking about the sanctuary of His body.* John tells us that Jesus referred directly to His cross and resurrection three years before His death. We should date this in early April of A.D. 31.⁴ This is over a year earlier than the first Synoptic prediction.

With this as his starting point, we would be right to expect that John's Gospel highlights the cross and resurrection throughout.

¹ Cf. Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1977), 61. The parallel lines (//) between references stands for parallels.

² Cf. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, 61.

³ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references in John come from the *Living Water: The Gospel of John with Notes*, rev. 4, translated by Arthur L. Farstad (Glide, OR: Absolutely Free, 1996). Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references (other than John's Gospel) are from the *New King James Version* (Nashville: Nelson, 1978).

⁴ John 2:19 was spoken during the time He was in Jerusalem for the Passover (cf. John 2:13). Animals and money-changers would not remain after the sacrifice for the Passover meal. This Passover was April 7, A.D. 30. He was crucified three years later, April 3, A.D. 33. Cf. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, 143.

The Cross-and-Resurrection as One Sign

John arranges his Gospel testimony around eight signs.

Jesus actually performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book. But these [eight signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [this]⁵ you may have life in His name. (John 20:30–31)

The most important of all of those signs was Jesus' crucifixion/resurrection. How do we know that John regards it as a sign? When Jesus chased the money-changers and the sellers of animals out of the Court of the Gentiles, Judeans demanded of him: *What miraculous sign do You show us, since You do these things?* (John 2:18). *Jesus answered them, "Destroy this sanctuary [His body] and I will raise it up in three days."* (John 2:19).

His answer assigns the cross/resurrection to the status of a sign. It is not two signs, but one.

How Does the Cross-and-Resurrection Relate to the Content of Faith?

Besides being a single sign, it is also the most important of the signs. It is the most important sign for two reasons:

1. It is the means by which He takes away sin's death-sentence and gives life to believers.
2. It is the sign with the greatest persuasive impact upon the unbeliever.

To emphasize this point, let us momentarily ignore John's other seven signs. We can say:

[This sign, Jesus' cross and resurrection is]⁶ . . . written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:31)

John sees the signs as persuasive. Jesus' signs [including the cross/resurrection] should persuade people that Jesus is who He says He is and that He does what He says He does.

If this observation is correct, it would not be surprising to find evidence of it within the argument of John. Indeed, this is the case. Jesus Himself speaks of the cross as persuasive to multitudes of unbelievers.

⁵ For clarity, the bracketed words have been added.

⁶ The cross-and-resurrection is not the only sign given for the purpose that people believe in Christ. However, it should be apparent that it (along with the other signs) was given for this purpose.

John 12 and Isaiah

During New Testament times, the Bible was not divided into chapters and verses. This affected how one Scripture writer would cite an earlier writer. It was not possible to tell listeners orally (or to write in a book), “as Isaiah 52:13–53:12 says.” If Jesus or John had said this, no one in the first century would understand the chapter and verse reference.

C.H. Dodd wrote an important book⁷ over fifty years ago that examined this question. Dodd concluded that New Testament writers often quote only one or two verses (to save space), even though they were referring to an entire context. The portion in bold (Isaiah 53:1) is the extent of what John 12:38 quotes, but Jesus (and John) were working with an entire context. Using Isaiah 53:1 as a title for the whole context saves much space—New Testament authors did not have the space-saving luxury of saying “Isaiah 52:13–53:12.” Neither did Jesus Himself have such a luxury as He spoke. Quoting one key verse served as a reminder of an entire context.

¹³ Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high. ¹⁴ Just as many were astonished at you, So His visage was marred more than any man, And His form more than the sons of men; ¹⁵ So shall He sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at Him; For what had not been told them they shall see, And what they had not heard they shall consider. ⁵³¹ **Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?** ² For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him. ³ He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. ⁴ Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. ⁸ He was taken from prison and from judgment, And who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken. ⁹ And they made His grave with the wicked—But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth. ¹⁰ Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand. ¹¹ He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, And He shall divide the spoil with the strong, Because He poured out His soul unto death, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.

Dodd argued that the New Testament pays close attention to the context. We must recognize that authors and speakers cited entire contexts, not just the singular quoted verses.

⁷ C.H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1952).

Even today, we do use this. If one says, “a day that shall live in infamy,” it brings to mind F.D.R.’s entire speech after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the arguments that he used to persuade Congress to declare war. Examples could be multiplied.

We recognize that the Isaiah passage predicts God’s Servant’s being put to death as a criminal, but bearing the sins of others.

53⁵ But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. . . . ^{6b} And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. . . . ^{8b} He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken. . . . ¹⁰ Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand. . . . ^{11b} He shall bear their iniquities. ^{12b} He poured out His soul unto death. And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.

It says that Israel overwhelmingly rejected Him.

53¹ Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? . . . ³ He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. ⁴ Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted.

It also speaks of Him after His resurrection.

^{10b} When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand. ¹¹ He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge, My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities. ^{12a} Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, And He shall divide the spoil with the strong, Because He poured out His soul unto death,

When examined closely, this passage is a wonderful anticipation of the crucifixion resulting from the nation rejecting the Servant, but God righting that wrong through Christ’s resurrection. Then He extends grace, even to the nation that rejected Him. In light of this, is it not reasonable that Jesus would select Isaiah 53:1 as the title for the whole?

53¹ Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

John introduced the Isaiah passage in this way:

*12³⁷ But though He had performed so many miraculous signs in their present, they did not believe in Him. ³ This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet, which He spoke:
Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*

Despite Jesus doing so many signs, Isaiah was right. The nation overwhelmingly would reject God's Servant and put Him to death. There is a bright spot, though. John 12:42a says that the rejection was not universal: *Nevertheless, even among the rulers, many believed in Him.*⁸ If *even among the rulers* there were many who believed in Him, clearly there were multitudes among non-rulers who believed in Him. In other words, the rejection is widespread, but not universal. It is like John 1:11–12:

He came to His own [things⁹] and His own people did not accept Him. But to as many as did accept Him, He gave the right to be God's children, to those who believed in His Name.

Rejection was widespread, but not universal. This is in keeping with what Isaiah says, because he indicates that the Servant justifies many within the nation (53:11). In other words, the answer to *who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?* is that unbelief is not universal, though widespread.

A Closer Look at Isaiah 52:13–14

We have seen that Jesus pointed His audience toward Isaiah 52:13–53:12. We have not yet looked at the first two verses.

¹³ *Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high.* ¹⁴ *Just as many were astonished at you, So His visage was marred more than any man, And His form more than the sons of men.*

Verse 14 speaks of the results of His beatings and crucifixion. They made His face repulsive. They viewed Him as cursed by God.

^{53^b} *And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.* ⁴ *Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted.*

What about verse 13? We see the words *He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high*, and think resurrection or ascension. Could it refer to the cross? The juxtaposition with verse 14 suggests that as He was lifted up on the cross, His visage was marred by the torture He had endured.

Some may say. “No! Isaiah switches scenes quickly. He cannot have the cross in view, when He speaks of the Servant being exalted.” However, we need to look further, before dismissing this thought.

⁸ Verse 42b explains the silence of most of the rulers (other than Nicodemus, who was actually quite vocal about Jesus). There was a fear about being barred from the synagogue. Messages indicating that these believers rulers possess everlasting life are available on the Message of Life Ministries website (www.mol316.com). Messages 6–7 and 34 in the John series address this passage.

⁹ The reason for adding the word *things* is that this use of *own* is neuter, while the second use of *own* in the verse is masculine.

Let us examine John 12:27–34:

²⁷ *“Now My soul is distressed, and what shall I say—‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this reason I came to this hour.* ²⁸ ***Father, glorify Your name.**”*

Then a voice came from heaven:

“I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.”

²⁹ *So the crowd which stood by and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said,*

“An angel has spoken to Him.”

³⁰ *Jesus responded, “It was not because of Me that this voice came, but for your sakes.*

³¹ *Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.* ³² *“And as for Me, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.”* ³³ *Now He said this to indicate what kind of death He was about to die.*

³⁴ *The crowd answered Him,*

“We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. So how can You say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this Son of Man?”

Verses 28–29 speak of the Father glorifying His name, while 32–34 speak of Jesus being lifted up on a cross to die. It may be tempting to say that *lifting Christ up* (verses 32–34) happens at the cross, while *glorifying the Father’s Name* (verses 28–29) *only* occurs after the cross.

To jump to this conclusion is to miss verse 27’s connection with verse 28. The hour that distressed Christ might seem to be one that He would seek to avoid. That is not the case. Rather than praying to be spared going to the cross (*Father, save Me from this hour*), He said, *But for this reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name*. The cross was a humiliation for Christ, but it glorified the Father.

From Jesus’ standpoint, was the cross only humiliation? No. Although Romans reserved crucifixion for the vilest of criminals, there is an irony that they made people look up to Christ as He was high and lifted up. How fitting for Jesus to appeal to the context of Isaiah 52:13–14:

¹³ *Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high.* ¹⁴ *Just as many were astonished at you, So His visage was marred more than any man, And His form more than the sons of men.*

In John 12, Jesus has done so many signs before the nation, but is still overwhelmingly rejected by it. What else can He do? John 12:32 gives the answer:

If I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.

The cross is a powerfully persuasive apologetic for people to believe Jesus Christ’s guarantee of everlasting life. The word *draw* is *elkō*. The idea of drawing is persuasion. Lifting Christ on the cross will persuade people everywhere concerning Christ.¹⁰

¹⁰ John 6:44–45 also supports the persuasion idea. ⁴⁴ *No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws [elkō] him, and I will raise him up on the last day.* ⁴⁵ *It is written in the prophets, “And they will all be taught by God.” Therefore everyone listens to the Father, and learns, comes to Me.* Verse 44 says that drawing is essential, but verse 45 explains how it happens: The one who learns from the Father is (by definition) one who is God-taught. The child who says “2 + 2 = 5,” needs to be persuaded that “2 + 2 = 4.” Once persuaded, the child has learned this. Similarly, the Father draws, persuades, teaches people concerning Christ. That is, such people are believers.

The idea that the cross persuades people concerning Christ (John 12:32) is in keeping with John's purpose statement.

Jesus actually performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book. But these [eight signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30–31)

As stated before, John wrote regarding each of the signs for the purpose of persuading people, but the cross/resurrection is particularly persuasive.

[This sign, Jesus' cross and resurrection is] . . . written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:31)

Within John's presentation of Jesus, there are three separate occasions when Jesus is lifted up. Each of them involves an exaltation. Each is persuasive to people mentioned in John.

1. the cross (cf. John 12),
2. the resurrection (cf. John 20:8 and 28–29),
3. the ascension (cf. John 1:50–51).

Jesus' Message to Nicodemus (John 3)

Nicodemus wanted to understand what Jesus said, because he knew that He came from God (John 3:2). However, Nicodemus struggled to understand what Jesus was saying. Therefore, Jesus finally illustrated by reminding him of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. John 3:14–15 says, *And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, likewise the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.* Once again, Jesus was looking forward to the cross, where He would be lifted up and draw all to Himself. He speaks of the persuasiveness of the cross.

Conclusion

If we seek to be faithful to the message of John's Gospel testimony, we will give great emphasis to the cross and resurrection—as Jesus did and as John did. However, if we are faithful to that message, the cross and resurrection serve as a means not an end. It is the means by which Jesus is able to remove sin's death sentence and to guarantee everlasting life to all believers. It is also a most powerful means of persuasion. The honest reader perceives what the cross and resurrection signifies. It is a sign that Jesus is the life-giving Messianic Son of God, not a criminal (as His opponents claimed). He is certainly to deliver on His guarantee of everlasting life to all believers. In other words, the lifting up on Jesus on a cross draws many to Christ. It is a powerful means of persuasion.

If a person to whom we witness believes that Jesus was crucified and resurrected, but does not know about His guarantee of everlasting life, what should we do? My suggestion for working with such people is to use the cross and resurrection as an apologetic for believing Christ's promise. Jesus says *if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself. Now He said this to indicate what kind of death He was about to die.* (John 12:32–33). The One who was lifted up in death, lifted up in Resurrection and also lifted up in Ascension.